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## RUSSIA: Criminal case for repeat "discreditation"

By Victoria Arnold, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

*Investigators are working on a criminal case against 86-year-old independent Orthodox Archbishop Viktor Pivovarov for repeat "discreditation" of the Armed Forces. If convicted, he could be imprisoned for five years. He condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the conduct of the war as "Satanic". The Federal Investigative Committee and Krasnodar Region branches of the Interior Ministry and Federal Security Service did not answer questions on the case. Armed personnel raided his church in October 2023, torturing a fellow priest. The community is "very intimidated", with parishioners "afraid to attend services".*

Investigators have opened another criminal case against a Russian priest for opposing Russia's war against Ukraine on religious grounds. Viktor Pivovarov – Archbishop of an independent Orthodox church which is not part of the Moscow Patriarchate – learned in late December 2023 that he was under investigation under Criminal Code Article 280.3, Part 1 (repeat "discreditation" of the Russian Armed Forces). If convicted, he could be imprisoned for up to five years or fined up to more than a year's average pension.

Archbishop Viktor – who will turn 87 next month – has repeatedly condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the conduct of the war as "aggressive", "Satanic", and "cursed both by God and by people", in his sermons and articles, and in a YouTube video by independent media outlet Novaya Gazeta Europe in May 2023. His first (administrative) conviction was in March 2023 for anti-war comments in a sermon. Investigators are now accusing him of again "discrediting" the Armed Forces, this time in a blog post entitled "An answer to the question which concerns everyone today: what is this war?" (see below).

Armed personnel (apparently from the National Guard) raided Archbishop Viktor's church – the Holy Intercession Tikhonite Church in Slavyansk-na-Kubani, Krasnodar Region – in early October 2023. They beat, tortured, and detained his assistant, Hieromonk Iona Sigida, who was later briefly jailed for allegedly "disobeying a police officer". During the search, the armed men did not assault or detain Archbishop Viktor, but told him he would be criminally prosecuted for his anti-war pronouncements and articles (see below).

In late November, a court in Slavyansk-na-Kubani fined Fr Iona three weeks' average local wage under Administrative Code Article 20.3.3 ("Public actions aimed at discrediting the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation") for an article he had published on the church website. His whereabouts are currently unknown. "Fr Iona is in hiding", a church member told Forum 18 on 4 January. "They are trying very persistently to find him under the pretext of having 'a conversation'" (see below).

It is at present unknown which investigative agency is responsible for the criminal case against Archbishop Viktor, as officers who have questioned him have repeatedly failed to identify themselves, a church member told Forum 18 (see below).

Forum 18 sent enquiries to the Federal Investigative Committee and the Krasnodar Region branches of the Interior Ministry and the Federal Security Service (FSB), asking:

- why the expression of religious views about war, either in general or in relation to Ukraine, should be considered discreditation of the Armed Forces;
- what purpose the imprisonment of an almost 87-year-old would serve;
- and whether the case has been sent to prosecutors and when it will be heard in court. Forum 18 has received no response (see below).

Similarly, Forum 18 received no responses to its enquiries to the Krasnodar Region branches of the FSB, Interior Ministry, and Investigative Committee and the Federal Investigative Committee on 24 October 2023, as well as to the National Guard (to which Fr Iona believed the armed men belonged), asking:

- why armed force had been considered necessary in the October 2023 raid on the church;
- and whether the officers Fr Iona says tortured him had been suspended from duty and placed under investigation, in line with Russia's obligations under the United Nations (UN) Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment

or Punishment, and if not, why not. Forum 18 sent these questions again on 9 January 2024, with no response (see below).

It is also unclear when the criminal case against Archbishop Viktor might reach court. The Archbishop meanwhile remains at home under travel restrictions, and is "generally in good spirits", according to the church member (see below).

Archbishop Viktor's community, however, is "very intimidated", with parishioners "afraid to attend services". It is also concerned that it is under surveillance. Parishioners have said that "someone turns up at services and films everyone present", the church member told Forum 18. "This is probably a method of intimidation" (see below).

Forum 18 sent enquiries to the Krasnodar Region branches of the FSB and Interior Ministry, as well as to the Federal Investigative Committee, asking:

- why investigators had placed the church under surveillance;
- why they were threatening members of the community with prosecution;
- and whether any further administrative or criminal cases had been opened against anybody other than Archbishop Viktor.

Forum 18 has received no reply (see below).

"Most close parishioners know quite well the history of the Russian Church, as well as the True Orthodox Church and the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad, and similar persecutions are not news, but knowing history and finding yourself in the middle of such history are two different things," the church member noted (see below).

Krasnodar Region: Elderly priest prosecuted for repeat "discreditation"

On 28 December 2023, investigators told Archbishop Viktor Ivanovich Pivovarov (born 8 February 1937) that they had opened a case against him under Criminal Code Article 280.3, Part 1, apparently because of a post he had written on his blog (<https://alsoaboutchrist.blogspot.com/2023/10/blog-post.html>), entitled "An answer to the question which concerns everyone today: what is this war?"

The investigators – who did not say for which agency they worked – initially summoned the Archbishop for questioning on 23 December. "They tried to treat me with respect", he told Kavkaz.Realii on 3 January 2024 (<https://www.kavkazr.com/a/nazyvayu-etu-voynu-bezzakonnoy-kubanskiy-arhiepiscope-o-presledovanii-za-propovedj/32756060.html>). He added, however, that his state-appointed lawyer "didn't say a word during the entire interview".

"I directly and openly spoke during the investigation about the lawlessness of the current government", the Archbishop commented to Novaya Gazeta on 29 December (<https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2023/12/29/nado-dat-orientir-liudiam>). "This government is the successor to the Bolsheviks who staged the coup in 1917".

Archbishop Viktor is currently under travel restrictions at home. It is unknown whether his case has yet been submitted to prosecutors or whether he has yet been charged. Investigators were initially "in a hurry" to get the case to court, a church member told Forum 18 on 5 January, intending to do so before the Russian Orthodox Christmas (7 January), but this did not happen. As of 16 January, Slavyansk City Court has no record of the case on its website.

"We have indirect information that, in addition to repeat discreditation of the army, they could be preparing another criminal case, possibly a group one, in order to close our church", the church member commented to Forum 18. "They summon people by phone for questioning, or come to their homes without sending any [written] summons to anyone, probably to hide what these interviews are about."

Officials from one of the security agencies visited the Archbishop on Christmas Eve, 6 January, "but they left after a short conversation", the church member added on 9 January. "The purpose [of this] is unknown. According to parishioners, the conversation was polite."

The state agency responsible for the investigation remains unknown. Forum 18 sent enquiries before the start of the working day of 9 January to the Federal Investigative Committee and the Krasnodar Region branches of the Interior Ministry and the Federal Security Service (FSB), asking:

- why the expression of religious views about war, either in general or in relation to Ukraine, should be considered discreditation of the Armed Forces;
- what purpose the imprisonment of an almost 87-year-old would serve;

- and whether the case has been sent to prosecutors and when it will be heard in court.

Forum 18 had received no response by the end of the working day in Krasnodar Region of 16 January.

"What is this war?"

In March 2023, Slavyansk City Court handed Archbishop Viktor a 40,000-Rouble fine ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2822](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2822)) – one month's average local wage or more than two months' average local pension - under Administrative Code Article 20.3.3, Part 1 ("Public actions aimed at discrediting the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation") for an anti-war sermon he had given in church.

In a video published by Novaya Gazeta Europe on 5 May 2023, Archbishop Viktor says that he told investigators and the court that "If there are foreign tanks under our windows, that means we are at war with an enemy, but if our tanks are in a neighbouring country, and our soldiers are savagely torturing the people, waging an aggressive war, then such a war is cursed both by God and by people".

Although the Archbishop has made many other anti-war comments on his church's website, investigators appear to have taken as his second offence of "discreditation" a blog post dated 12 October 2023 (<https://alsoaboutchrist.blogspot.com/2023/10/blog-post.html>) and entitled "An answer to the question which concerns everyone today: what is this war?"

This article, as Aleksandr Soldatov noted in Novaya Gazeta on 29 December, is an "explanation of [Archbishop Viktor's] attitude towards wars, and in the spirit of traditional Orthodox exegesis .. links wars with the sinful corruption of human nature".

Wars in the present day "are predominantly of an aggressive nature, through which we see their satanic essence", the Archbishop writes. "In the most recent war [in Ukraine], it is not the enemy's weapons that are deliberately destroyed by the Satanists in order to stop the war, but the people themselves – the gene pool of the nation, who decided to leave the camp of Satan and join those free from him."

Archbishop Viktor goes on to quote a Ukrainian official's Telegram post outlining civilian casualties and attacks on civilian infrastructure in the Ukrainian city of Krivy Rih on 14 July 2023.

The article continues: "Also, judging by the publications of the free press, it is clear how Satan's camp is making ready a nuclear catastrophe, which should destroy our civilisation in several stages, and already, with the aim of preparing for it, is blowing up the Kakhovka hydroelectric power station, which cooled the nuclear reactors of the Zaporozhye nuclear power plant."

The Archbishop sees the Russian government as successor to the Bolsheviks and as a conduit of Satanic forces; he believes that the end times are near and that conflict between good and evil will result in the latter's defeat, strongly implying the overthrow of Russia's current regime. "The holy war will end with the victory of the holy forces, and God's judgment will begin on all the worlds and those living in them. The worlds are already called 'new heavens and new earth', 'in which dwells righteousness (Revelation 21:1). And then God will be in everything."

Ready "to undergo any suffering for the truth"

"I am being persecuted for openly calling this war lawless. It is unleashed by lawless power," Archbishop Viktor said in his interview with Kavkaz.Realii on 3 January (<https://www.kavkazr.com/a/nazyvayu-etu-voynu-bezzakonnoy-kubanskiy-arhiepiskop-o-presledovanii-za-propovedj/32756060.html>). "Judge for yourself – legitimate legal power can only be by succession, from legitimate predecessors, or by popular election. The current government is aggressive, it is the successor to the Bolsheviks who organised the revolution. As a Christian, I cannot help but rebuke this."

Archbishop Viktor has been a "consistent opponent" of "Bolshevism" – as he describes the policies and practices of the present-day Russian government as well as those of its Soviet predecessor – all his life, the church member explained to Forum 18 on 5 January. "This moment is different only in that now, there is a formal reason for persecution. And if earlier he could simply be ignored [by the state authorities], now he can be openly persecuted within the framework of a repressive law."

Archbishop Viktor "is concerned that his persecution could harm both those around him and those who are trying to help", the church member added, but is "generally in good spirits".

The Archbishop has expressed his readiness to "undergo any suffering for the truth", Aleksandr Soldatov observed in Novaya Gazeta on 29 December (<https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2023/12/29/nado-dat-orientir-liudiam>). He quoted the Archbishop as saying "I'm going to the next world soon - I need to give people guidance".

Asked by Kavkaz.Realii what he would tell fellow Russians who are afraid to oppose the war in Ukraine openly for fear of

prosecution, Archbishop Viktor referred to the Book of Revelation, in which "in the list of sins for which terrible punishment awaits, those who are full of fear are listed first.. Today we are burdened with houses, amenities, material possessions, [we are] too attached to all this. Therefore, modern Christians need to pray that the Lord will strengthen them in fearlessness. And don't be afraid to tell the truth."

Armed raid on church, torture of priest

On 3 October 2023, 10 unidentified armed men raided Archbishop Viktor's Holy Intercession Tikhonite Church ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2872](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2872)) in Slavyansk-na-Kubani. The Church's clergy have repeatedly spoken out against Russia's war in Ukraine. "At least five searches [of different locations] took place simultaneously," Fr Iona Sigida told Forum 18. As well as seizing electronic devices and documents, the 10 armed men physically tortured and detained 32-year-old Fr Iona.

Fr Iona was later charged with "disobeying a police officer" (Administrative Code Article 19.3, Part 1), for which he was given two days' short-term imprisonment ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2872](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2872)) (administrativny arest). He was also charged under Administrative Code Article 20.3.3 ("Public actions aimed at discrediting the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation"), Part 1, for his article "The cult of war" published on the church's website.

The men told Archbishop Viktor that he would face criminal prosecution for repeat "discreditation" of the Armed Forces, but did not assault or detain him.

When Fr Iona was being questioned after the search, a masked interrogator told him: "They'll put you in prison for ten years – you won't be able to stand it", a church member told Forum 18 on 12 January.

On 20 November 2023, Slavyansk City Court fined Fr Iona 30,000 Roubles (about three weeks' average local wage) under Administrative Code Article 20.3.3. He was not present in court and does not appear to have appealed.

"The court found that [Sigida], on the Internet at <http://eshatologia.org>, committed public actions aimed at discrediting the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation in order to protect the interests of the Russian Federation and its citizens", Judge Yuliya Pelyushenko concluded, according to the written verdict, seen by Forum 18. "Namely, he expressed a negative opinion on a social network about the special military operation in Ukraine."

Forum 18 sent enquiries to the Krasnodar Region branches of the FSB, Interior Ministry, and Investigative Committee and the Federal Investigative Committee on 24 October 2023, as well as to the National Guard (to which Fr Iona believed the armed men belonged), asking:

- why armed force had been considered necessary in the raid on the church;

- and whether the officers Fr Iona says tortured him had been suspended from duty and placed under investigation pending criminal charges for torture, in line with Russia's obligations under the United Nations (UN) Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2693](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2693)), and if not, why not.

Forum 18 sent these questions again on 9 January 2024. Forum 18 had received no response by the end of the working day in Krasnodar Region of 16 January.

In late November, investigators began looking for Fr Iona again. He happened to be out when they came to the church in search of him, and did not return after he was warned of their interest. He is currently "in hiding", a church member told Forum 18 on 4 January, noting that investigators "are trying very persistently to find him under the pretext of [having] a 'conversation'". Fr Iona does not understand why he is wanted now, or on what grounds he might be imprisoned, the church member added on 12 January.

As of 10 January 2024, Fr Iona did not appear on the Interior Ministry's federal wanted list.

"Knowing history and finding yourself in the middle of such history are two different things"

Sunday services have continued at the Holy Intercession Tikhonite Church, both after the armed raid and after the criminal case was opened against Archbishop Viktor. Nevertheless, "The parish is very intimidated", the church member commented to Forum 18 on 5 January. "Parishioners are afraid to attend services. Indeed, the services themselves are quite disrupted because the singers, like everyone else, are also frightened by direct threats of persecution against them and try not to come, or come less often."

"Most close parishioners know quite well the history of the Russian Church, as well as the True Orthodox Church and the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad, and such persecutions are not news, but knowing history and finding yourself in the middle of such history are two different things."

The community is also concerned that it is under surveillance. "Officers come to every service, openly film everything and all the parishioners; others, under the guise of random people or parishioners, also holding their phones, ask intrusive questions," a church member told Forum 18. "This is probably a method of intimidation."

"Near the church there is a car on duty around the clock, which changes in shifts, and those sitting inside it monitor people coming and going. During a service, one unknown suspicious person introduced himself as Fr Iona's lawyer, and asked where he could find him. Officers are now also talking to parishioners, trying to persuade them to become informants through lies and intimidation, and there is some evidence that they have already succeeded in persuading someone to cooperate."

Forum 18 sent enquiries on 15 January to the Krasnodar Region branches of the FSB and Interior Ministry, as well as to the Federal Investigative Committee, asking:

- why investigators had placed the church under surveillance;
- why they were threatening members of the community with prosecution;
- and whether any further administrative or criminal cases had been opened against anybody other than Archbishop Viktor.

Forum 18 had received no reply by the end of the working day of 16 January.

Archbishop Viktor built the Holy Intercession Church himself on a private plot of land, Novaya Gazeta noted on 29 December. "The Russian Orthodox Church [Moscow Patriarchate] has repeatedly declared its intentions to prove the illegality of the 'alternative' community and take the church for itself, but the Archbishop enjoys great respect in the city, and the church has not yet been taken away".

Two imprisoned, two fined for opposing Russia's war in Ukraine on religious grounds

As well as many convictions for Administrative Code offences ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2835](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2835)), Russian courts have also convicted four people so far on Criminal Code charges for opposing Russia's renewed invasion of Ukraine on religious grounds:

– on 17 October 2022, Verkhoturye District Court (Sverdlovsk Region) fined Fr Nikandr Igoryevich Pinchuk ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2783](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2783)) (of a branch of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia [ROCOR] not in communion with the Moscow Patriarchate) 100,000 Roubles under Criminal Code Article 280.3, Part 1 for posts on VKontakte. In the posts, he accused the Russian army of shelling Ukrainian cities, called it the "horde of the Antichrist", and praised the "perseverance" of the defenders of "the city of Mary, Mariupol";

– on 30 March 2023, Timiryazevsky District Court in Moscow handed 63-year-old Mikhail Yuryevich Simonov a 7-year prison sentence ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2822](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2822)) under Criminal Code Article 207.3 ("Public dissemination, under the guise of credible statements, of knowingly false information on the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation"), Part 2 for two online comments about the war: "Killing children and women, on Channel One [television] we sing songs. We, Russia, have become godless [bezbozhniki]. Forgive us, Lord!," and "Russian pilots are bombing children." His appeal was rejected on 25 July 2023. [UPDATE: On 17 January 2024, a cassational appeal court reduced Simonov's prison term by six months.] His prison address is:

601122 Vladimirskaya oblast

Petushinsky rayon

g. Pokrov

ul. Frantsa Shtolverka 6

FKU Ispravitelnaya koloniya - 2 UFSIN Rossii po Vladimirskoy oblasti;

– on 7 August 2023, Soviet District Court in Tomsk fined Anna Sergeyevna Chagina ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2852](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2852)) 100,000 Roubles under Criminal Code Article 280.3, Part 1 for making anti-war posts on VKontakte after first being convicted for displaying a poster reading "Blessed are the peacemakers (Matthew 5:9)" at an anti-war protest. She appealed unsuccessfully at Tomsk Regional Court on 26 October 2023;

– on 31 August 2023, Kalinin District Court in St Petersburg sentenced Fr Ioann Valeryevich Kurmoyarov ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2857](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2857)) (of the same branch of ROCOR as Fr Nikandr) to 3 years' imprisonment under Criminal Code Article 207.3, Part 2, Paragraphs G and D for posting videos condemning the war on his YouTube channel.

The lower court accepted his and his lawyer's appeals on 1 and 20 December 2023, according to its website, but St Petersburg City Court has not yet listed any hearings. Fr Ioann remains in detention in the meantime. His prison address is:

196655 g. Sankt-Peterburg

g. Kolpino

ul. Kolpinskaya 9

Sledstvenniy izolyator No. 1 UFSIN po g. Sankt-Peterburgu i Leningradskoy oblasti

Investigators have also opened three criminal cases against people who have left Russia:

– Nina Aleksandrovna Belyayeva ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2809](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2809)), a Baptist and Communist municipal deputy from Voronezh (Criminal Code Article 207.3, Part 1). She left Russia in April 2022, shortly after the meeting of Semiluk District Council in which she denounced the invasion of Ukraine ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2737](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2737)) as a war crime, stating that "murdering other people" and invading "the territory of another state, which has nothing to do with the goal of self-defence of one's own state" have "nothing in common with Christian beliefs.";

– Fr Aleksandr Nikolayevich Dombrovsky ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2809](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2809)), a Moscow Patriarchate priest from Bryansk Region, who preached against the renewed invasion of Ukraine, for which he was punished by his Diocese. After being questioned by local police based on information provided by an informer, the police told him that the FSB security service had opened a case against him under an unknown Criminal Code article;

– Yury Kirillovich Sipko ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2852](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2852)), Baptist pastor and former head of the Russian Baptist Union (under investigation under Criminal Code Article 207.3, Part 2, Paragraph D), whose home in Moscow the Investigative Committee raided on 8 August 2023; they could not arrest him as he had already left the country, and they have now had him placed on the Interior Ministry's wanted list.

"Discreditation" and "false information"

On 4 March 2022, specific Criminal Code and Administrative Code penalties for allegedly "discrediting" and spreading alleged "false information" about Russia's actions in its renewed invasion of Ukraine ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2737](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2737)). Other new legal amendments punish calling for sanctions against Russia (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/03/07/russia-criminalizes-independent-war-reporting-anti-war-protests>). The Criminal Code penalties were increased on 28 March 2023 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2822](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2822)).

Also on 28 March 2023 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2822](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2822)), the Administrative and Criminal Code definitions were widened to include criticism of "volunteer formations, organisations and individuals who assist in the fulfilment of tasks assigned to the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation" (that is, private mercenary units such as Wagner). On 25 December 2023, further amendments widened the definitions to include criticism of new volunteer units of the National Guard (Rosgvardiya). These units have recruited former Wagner mercenaries.

These Administrative and Criminal Code articles are:

Administrative Code Article 20.3.3, Part 1 punishes "Public actions aimed at discrediting the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation in order to protect the interests of the Russian Federation and its citizens, [and] maintain international peace and security, including public calls to prevent the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation for these purposes, or equally, aimed at discrediting the exercise by state bodies of the Russian Federation of their powers outside the territory of the Russian Federation for these purposes, if these actions do not contain signs of a criminal offence."

- Part 1 carries these possible fines:

- for individuals – 30,000 to 50,000 Roubles;

- for people in official positions – 100,000 to 200,000 Roubles;

- for legal entities – 300,000 to 500,000 Roubles.

A fine of 50,000 Roubles represented approximately two months' average wages in 2023 for those in work, or more than two months' average state retirement pension. The equivalents vary from region to region.

Administrative Code Article 20.3.3, Part 2 covers the same actions, if they are: "accompanied by calls to hold unauthorised public events, or create a threat of harm to the life and/or health of citizens [or] property, a threat of mass disruption of public order and (or) public safety, or a threat of interfering with or stopping the functioning of objects of life support, transport or social infrastructure, credit organisations, energy facilities, industry or communications."

- Part 2 carries possible fines:

- for individuals – 50,000 to 100,000 Roubles;

- for people in official positions – 200,000 to 300,000 Roubles;

- for legal entities – 500,000 to 1 million Roubles.

A fine of 50,000 Roubles represented approximately two months' average wages in 2023 for those in work, or about six weeks' average state retirement pension. The equivalents vary from region to region.

A fine of 1 million Roubles represented approximately 3 and a quarter years' average wages in 2023 for those in work, or around 2 and half years' average state retirement pension. The equivalents vary from region to region.

Administrative Code Article 20.3.3 is used against apparently any form of anti-war statement either in public spaces or online.

If individuals more than once in one year commit an offence covered by Administrative Code Article 20.3.3 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2822](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2822)) ("Public actions aimed at discrediting the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation"), they may be prosecuted under Criminal Code Article 280.3 ("Public actions aimed at discrediting the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation in order to protect the interests of the Russian Federation and its citizens, [and] maintain international peace and security").

Criminal Code Article 207.3, Part 1 punishes "Public dissemination, under the guise of credible statements, of knowingly false information about the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation in order to protect the interests of the Russian Federation and its citizens [and] maintain international peace and security, as well as about the exercise by state bodies of the Russian Federation of their powers outside the territory of the Russian Federation for those purposes".

- Part 1 carries the following punishments:

- a fine of 700,000 to 1.5 million Roubles;

- or up to 1 year's correctional work ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2681](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2681));

- or up to 5 years' assigned work ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2681](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2681));

- or up to 5 years' imprisonment.

A fine of 1 million Roubles represented approximately 3 and a quarter years' average wages in 2023 for those in work, or around 2 and half years' average state retirement pension. The equivalents vary from region to region.

Assigned work ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2681](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2681)) may be imposed instead of imprisonment, and may take the form of any job in any organisation, as determined by the correctional centre responsible for administering the sentence. It is paid, but deductions of 5-20 per cent may be transferred to the prison service.

Correctional work ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2681](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2681)) - a lesser category of punishment - involves payment to the state of 5-20 per cent of wages, either from one's own job or, if unemployed, from a job allocated by the local authority in cooperation with the prison service.

Criminal Code Article 207.3 Part 2 punishes the same actions, "a) by a person using their official position; b) by a group of persons; c) with the artificial creation of evidence for accusations; d) for selfish motives; or e) for reasons of political, ideological, racial, national or religious hatred or enmity, or for reasons of hatred or enmity against any social group".

- Part 2 carries the following punishments:

- a fine of 3 million to 5 million Roubles;

- or up to 5 years' assigned work ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2681](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2681)) "with deprivation of the right to hold

certain positions or engage in certain activities ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2681](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2681)) for up to 5 years";

- or 5 to 10 years' imprisonment "with deprivation of the right to hold certain positions or engage in certain activities ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2681](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2681)) for up to 5 years".

Criminal Code Article 207.3 Part 3 punishes the same actions if they have "grave consequences", and carries the following punishment:

- 10 to 15 years' imprisonment "with deprivation of the right to hold certain positions or engage in certain activities ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2681](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2681)) for up to 5 years".

Criminal Code Article 280.3 ("Public actions aimed at discrediting the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation in order to protect the interests of the Russian Federation and its citizens, [and] maintain international peace and security, including public calls to prevent the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation for these purposes, or equally, aimed at discrediting the exercise by state bodies of the Russian Federation of their powers outside the territory of the Russian Federation for these purposes").

- Part 1 punishes individuals with either:

- a 100,000 to 300,000 Roubles fine;

- or up to three years' assigned work ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2681](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2681));

- or 4 to 6 months' detention in an "arrest house" (arestny dom);

- or up to 5 years' imprisonment, followed by up to 5 years' deprivation of the right to hold certain positions or engage in certain activities ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2681](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2681)).

- Part 2 punishes the same actions, "resulting in death by negligence and/or causing harm to the health of citizens, [or] property, [or causing] mass violations of public order and/or public safety, or interfering with or stopping the functioning of life support, transport or social infrastructure, credit organisations, energy facilities, industry or communications."

The punishments are:

- a 300,000 to 1 million Roubles fine;

- or up to 7 years' imprisonment, followed by up to 7 years' deprivation of the right to hold certain positions or engage in certain activities ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2681](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2681)).

A fine of 1 million Roubles represented approximately 3 and a quarter years' average wages in 2023 for those in work, or around 2 and half years' average state retirement pension. The equivalents vary from region to region.

Police and other investigative agencies also use other Criminal Code articles against people protesting against the war, such as Article 213 ("Hooliganism"), Article 214 ("Vandalism"), and Article 318 ("Violence against the authorities"). These are not yet known to have been used against anyone protesting from a belief-based perspective. (END)

More reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Russia (<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=10>)

For background information see Forum 18's Russia religious freedom survey ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2897](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897)).

The then-Director of the SOVA Center for Information and Analysis, Alexander Verkhovsky, in July 2010 wrote a personal commentary about the systemic problems of Russian "anti-extremism" laws ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=1468](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1468)). This organisation was forcibly liquidated in August 2023 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=1468](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1468)), and a group of its former staff are now a community of researchers under the name of SOVA Research Center (<https://www.sova-center.ru/en/about-us/>).

Forum 18's compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=1351](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1351))

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